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THE GAONIC COMMENTARY TO TEHAROT¹

IN 1856 there appeared for the first time a so-called Commentary on the sixth Order of the Mishnah, i.e., the section *Teharot* (פרוש על סדר טהרות). The term "commentary" is not to be taken literally, as the work does not in any way comment upon the contents of the Mishnah, but merely intends to serve as a dictionary for the foreign words (Arabic, Syriac, Persian, Greek), which are particularly numerous in all the tractates of this Mishnic section. The work, though small in size, covering only 45 pages in the printed edition, is of very great philological importance. Its author shows a marvelous familiarity with the aforementioned languages and their different dialects as they were used in his time in various provinces of the Orient. The editor, J. Rosenberg, unfamiliar with any of these languages, made no attempt to identify and to explain the many hundreds of words quoted and discussed by the author. He merely published a copy of a manuscript with all the mistakes and peculiarities of spelling, which present great difficulties even to the most learned Orientalists. This text was reprinted with many additional mistakes in the Wilna edition of the Talmud and later also at the end of the Mishnayot published by the famous printing establishment of Romm (Wilna 1908).

The oldest German and French commentators of the Talmud, as R. Gershom of Mayence, Rashi, his grandson Samuel B. Meir, and others attribute the Commentary explicitly to Hai, the last Gaon of Pumbedita (died 1038). Modern scholars, with a few exceptions, follow this view. Of late, however, the ascription to Hai Gaon has been subjected to serious doubts. Dr. J. N. Epstein, who during recent years has done valuable research work in the literature of the Geonim, now submits this Commentary to a very minute investigation, examining its content and composition from every possible point of view. The first chapter (pp. 1-36) is devoted to the much mooted question of authorship. Adducing numerous quotations of the Commentary as they appear in the works

¹ *Eine kritische Einleitung zu dem R. Hai Gaon zugeschriebenen Kommentar.* Von Dr. J. N. EPSTEIN. Berlin: MAYER & MULLER, 1915. pp. VI+160.

of later authors, especially in the *'Usul* of Jonah Ibn Janah (992-1052) and the *Aruk* of Nathan B. Jehiel of Rome (concluded in 1101), he proves conclusively that the Commentary cannot possibly be the work of Hai Gaon and expresses the opinion that its author is none other than Saadia, the famous Gaon of Sura. The reasons against the ascription to Hai are: explanations of words given by Hai in his *Responsa* and elsewhere or quoted in works of later authors contradict those found in the Commentary or are missing therein entirely; Hai had no knowledge of Greek and, as he himself states, never saw the Palestinian Targum, both of which are often quoted in the Commentary; the author of the latter shows the most intimate acquaintance with the life, conditions, and customs of the population of Palestine, which is inexplicable in the Babylonian Hai, who, as some of his statements suggest, never was in Palestine; and, finally, the author repeatedly quotes as sources the earlier Geonim of Sura, but never those of Pumbedita, the seat of Hai Gaon. Now these very reasons that speak against the attribution of the Commentary to Hai strongly recommend Saadia's authorship. By a correct restoration of a marginal gloss which crept into the text Dr. Epstein (p. 30) is in a position to prove that the early redactor of the Commentary likewise names Saadia explicitly as the author of the work. Moreover, there is sufficient evidence throughout the Commentary for Saadia's authorship.

Having thus disposed of the question of authorship, Dr. Epstein gives a general characterization of the work (pp. 36-74), showing the author's method and procedure in treating his subject, his mastery of numerous Oriental dialects from which he derives his lexical explanations, and the wide range of his knowledge of the literature of his time. Here I should like to remark that in pointing out the characteristic features of the Commentary, Dr. Epstein does not sufficiently emphasize the fact, though he mentions it occasionally, that these same features are commonly recognized as peculiar characteristics of Saadia's numerous writings and hence greatly strengthen the view that he is the author also of the Commentary in question. Thus for instance the author's rationalistic explanations of Mishnic passages in opposition to explanations of the Talmud, his repeated efforts to find parallels for difficult words in the Bible and the Targumim, his habit of explaining Hebrew or Aramaic words by Arabic words of similar sounds, his fondness for alliterations, often taking flights into the realm of poetry, as well as some other pecu-

liarities of style—have long been recognized as outstanding features in the works of Saadia. Dr. Epstein might therefore have stressed these points in favor of Saadia's authorship. It should further be observed that in view of these facts the objection to the attribution of the Commentary to Saadia on the ground that the Gaon wrote nearly all his works in Arabic, while this Commentary seems to have been written by him originally in Hebrew, is of little weight. We do not know the circumstances that may have induced him to deviate in this instance from his usual habit of writing his books in the vernacular.

It would require too much space to give an adequate account of Dr. Epstein's admirable industry and profound learning, as displayed throughout the pages of this book, but special mention must be made of chapter III (pp. 74–98), containing a detailed examination of the sources used by the author of the Commentary, and chapter IV (pp. 98–112) in which Dr. Epstein gives a minute critical analysis of the entire text, showing the extent to which a later redactor changed and amplified the original work.

Of great importance is chapter V (pp. 112–130), wherein Dr. Epstein traces with great accuracy and thoroughness all the direct or indirect citations from the Commentary in the works of later authors, as Nissim and Hananel of Kairwan, Nathan b. Jehiel of Rome, in whose *Aruk* he points out over 550 passages taken from the Commentary, Maimonides and others down to the 14th century, when all traces of the Commentary disappeared to be brought to light again in recent times. In chapter VI (pp. 130–131) it is briefly proved that the author of the Commentary had composed a similar Commentary on the first Order of the Mishnah (Zeraim), which, however, is no longer in existence. Passages therefrom are quoted in the Commentary before us and in the *Aruk*. Dr. Epstein then devotes a whole chapter (pp. 131–148) to a minute description of the numerous manuscripts of the Commentary as well as of the *Aruk* upon which he has based his study. Of real philological importance is also chapter VIII (pp. 148–151), in which all the orthographic peculiarities in the transliteration of foreign words into Hebrew are pointed out. Two appendices (on the original title of the Commentary and on a commentary on the Mishnah by Hai Gaon, now lost) and some additions and corrections conclude Dr. Epstein's work, which, it may unhesitatingly be said, is the most learned publication within recent years in the field of Gaonic literature. All the more regrettable it is that a work like

this should have been so carelessly edited. On nearly every page of the book one finds the phrases "siehe oben" and "siehe unten", intended to serve as cross-references. I have counted 133 of such references and some may have escaped my notice. Very often such an "oben" or "unten" means from 50 to 100 pages above or below (e.g., p. 48, note, "unten" refers to p. 128; p. 70 to 130; 96 to 142, while "oben" on pp. 141, 153, 154 alludes to pp. 30, 19, 30, respectively). As the book is composed of many thousands of philological details and has no index, it follows that the reader, in order to get the full benefit of the work, has to learn its contents by heart. Names of authors and titles of books are likewise quoted in a haphazard way, as Bernstein (pp. 27, 32, twice, 49) for Bornstein (well-known Hebrew writer on calendar and chronology), Schor (4, 26) for Schorr, S. Frankel (125, 130) for Z. Frankel, Eknin (55) for 'Aknin, Jahuda (67, 68) for Yahuda. Ginzberg's *Geonica* is quoted as "The Geonim" (p. 3), Saadia's *Oeuvres* is "ouvres" (p. 10), Saadyana (Schechter) is Saadiana (32), and so forth. Misprints are too numerous to be pointed out, especially in references to sources, so that it is not always possible to verify them. "Ausbesserung" (p. 131) means mending (clothes), read "Verbesserung" (correction of mistakes); for Homoteleuton (p. 134) read Homoioteleuton. רבִּיק' (p. 31) occurs also in Saadia's *Amanat*, p. 28, 1.14; p. 30, 11.7, 13, read 'Uḡsin, I, 5.

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